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Cane Toads and Underpants: A Pocket Guide for Writing for Boys

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Panel: Teaching Writing

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Kathy White

CANE TOADS AND UNDERPANTS: A POCKET GUIDE TO WRITING FOR BOYS

I'm a children's librarian who writes for kids. Stereotypes might tell you that this means I write about bums, underpants, schools of wizardry, rainbow fairies, intestinal worms, dinosaurs, young spies or squashed cane toads. Not yet. My income would probably double if I did. If I wrote about vampires and put a red and black cover on it, my income would skyrocket, no doubt.

I teach short, practical writing courses – the equivalent of the *Dummies' Guide to Elvis* and *Kite Surf in a Weekend*. But today I've squeezed it even further into a *Dingbat's Pocket Guide to Writing a Boys' Bestseller*, because boy readers are harsh critics, and if you write something they love, you'll become a literary hero.

1. Write about an orphaned boy (Harry Potter or Alex Rider), or at least a kid with pathetic or disturbed parents as in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Boys generally only read about boys, but there is a bit of violence in *Matilda*. Remember when Miss Trunchbull does the hammer-throw, wildly swinging a girl by her plaits, around and around above her head. That compensates sufficiently for *Matilda* being a girl. The main character should have a sad background story, and plenty of room for good or bad growth. Then give this little schmuck something to do and some skills to do it, but just a few. He has to struggle with a capital **S**. Don't make things easy for him or your readers will start yawning and crawl back to their Xbox.
2. Add some buddies, and at least one enemy. Give them distinctive personalities, and different names. Names matter in kids' books. Don't call your characters Jed, Joe and Jill. Vary the consonants and number of syllables, or your readers will get confused. Why do you think J.K. Rowling was inspired by Ron Weasley, who is dim but funny, Harry Potter, the imperfect but brave hero and Hermione Granger, the brainbox? Together they are a force to be reckoned with. As for the enemies, be unkind. Give them harsh-sounding names that blend consonants or that means something particularly nasty in another language (Miss Trunchbull, Severus Snape and Voldemort). Parents are okay as small-bit characters in your story but keep them out of the spotlight. Penguin, the publisher of the Puffin imprint told me this when I was writing for the *Kivi Bites* series.
3. Knowing what type of story it is helps you to figure out the sort of things that need to happen in the plot, and how it needs to end. If your character is looking for something, he

needs to find it ... eventually ... even if it takes 14 books to do so (*Deltora Quest*, *Inheritance Trilogy*, *Warriors*). Give him GADGETS to help him achieve his goal (*Zac Power*, *Alpha Force*, *Maximum Ride*, *Cherub*, *Artemis Fowl*) and creatures to thwart him (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*). And if your character doesn't find what he is looking for, or you don't end your story adequately, expect to receive millions of individual pieces of hate mail (*Lionboy*).

4. Make your prose fast, furious and dangerous, from beginning to end, with small lulls in between. Set your scene, introduce your character and give the reader a taste of what's to come within the first page. Let's just get on with it, okay? Keep it pacy and exciting (not introspective) at least until your boy readers are in their forties and need to slow down a bit.
5. The *Captain Underpants* series and the Andy Griffiths books (*The Day My Bum Went Psycho*, *Zombie Bums from Uranus*) work well as adventure stories combined with silliness or revoltingness. If you can't cope with writing silliness, you can still use your own sense of humour, with unexpected twists and turns (Paul Jennings' short stories). Humour even works well in serious books that deal with difficult subjects (*See Ya Later*, *Simon*, and *Two Weeks with the Queen*).
6. Boys read the *Guinness Book of Records* from cover-to-cover because they love facts. That's why non-fiction combines with fiction in series like *Horrible Histories* and why the new cosmology chapter book series by Stephen and Lucy Hawking is a big hit (*George's Secret Guide to the Universe*). Use what you know but still keep the 'story' the most important focus.
7. Hang around with kids and watch TV to figure out what random things they're into. The best children's writers are people who think like kids. If you can do this, you can probably write conversations that sound "like, authentically awesome."
8. Boys are funny little creatures. When they find out a book has been written by a girl, it's like "A GIRL! Well, that's gonna be dull city." If your first name is Joanna and your last name is Rowling the way to cope with this is to call yourself J.K. Rowling and cross your fingers. The woman writing the best-selling *Zac Power* series used her first name Hilary in the form of H.I. Larry. Of course, if your name is too dull to even contemplate using it, you can always invent a name like Lemony Snicket and name your books something that implies 'disaster' (*A Series of Unfortunate Events*).

If you do all this, and produce the next bestselling series about underpants OR intestinal worms, I hope you'll do me the honour of putting my 'pocket guide' on your acknowledgements page.

